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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL, PRM, IO

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [CASC](#) [TH](#) [LA](#) [LAOS](#) [HUMAN](#) [RIGHTS](#)

SUBJECT: AMCITS RELEASED IN LAOS HOLD PRESS CONFERENCE IN BANGKOK

REF: VIENTANE 600 AND PREVIOUS

11. (U) SUMMARY: Three US citizens, recently detained in Vientiane after trying to assist with the surrender of approximately 170 Hmong and Khmu in Laos, held a press conference on June 9 describing the events of June 4 and 5 (Reftels). Ed and Georgie Szendrey gave an emotional account of their "humanitarian mission" and resultant detention in a security facility in the Lao capital. They appealed for the GOL to accept UN assistance for those who have surrendered and a military "stand down" with other groups who they claim are hiding in the forests and also wish to surrender. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) In a 90-minute press conference entitled, "Laos' Desperate Hmong Fighters: The Final Chapter?", Ed and Georgie Szendrey and Nhia Yang described for the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand (FCCT) their motivations for helping the Hmong (and a small number of Khmu) to surrender, their subsequent detention by Lao authorities and their hopes for the peaceful surrender of thousands more. The French journalist, Cyril Payen, who was scheduled to speak, did not attend. Payen released a documentary earlier this year showing purported gross human rights violations inflicted on ethnic Hmong Lao.

13. (U) Ed Szendrey opened the conference by matter-of-factly describing how he and his wife and two Hmong-American colleagues, who are all members of the California-based NGO called "The Fact Finding Commission," entered Laos the first week of June and early on June 4 met a group of about 170 women and children. He described how at first apparently armed Hmong men were with the women and children but in the darkness of the early morning made tearful good-byes to their wives and children and entrusted them to the Szendreys. They then "surrendered" by walking to a nearby village where they were warmly greeted by the local people. Eventually the local police chief and Lao security forces arrived to take custody of the Hmong.

14. (SBU) The Szendreys recounted how later in the morning they and Nhia Yang boarded a bus for Vientiane. Subsequently, at Kilometer 52 outside of the capital at about 2:30 pm on June 4, they were detained by Lao security officials. Ed Szendry noted that "we were not arrested, just detained." He noted that he and his wife were interrogated until 11 pm at night on June 4 and again on the morning of June 5. He claimed his Hmong Lao colleagues were interrogated until 3 in the morning June 4 and that all were kept in stark rooms with no windows. Georgie recounted emotionally her time in the windowless room saying she felt "betrayed, violated and deeply hurt" by the GOL, who refused "for 47 hours" to contact the US Embassy or the UN as they had requested. (Note: No mention was made at any time during the press conference of a 4th Amcit, Sia Cher Vang, who remains in detention in Vientiane. End Note.)

15. (U) Nghia and the Szendreys stated they had heard no information about the status of those who surrendered and called upon the GOL to allow the UN or other "independent observers" to monitor their situation. They noted that one of their interrogators denied that the Hmong Lao were part of a resistance movement and were only a group of villagers moving from one village to another. The Szendreys claimed that there is a separate larger group of Hmong in Bolikhamsai province, but they are unable to surrender because they are surrounded by Lao security forces.

16. (SBU) The Szendreys went on at some length to describe what they viewed as the dire poverty of the Hmong they encountered. They sounded conciliatory towards the GOL, using statements such as, "We just want reconciliation and healing to take place so these people can live in peace. We don't hate the Lao Government." They downplayed the idea of the Hmong resistance as an active military force. Describing the Hmong, Ed said that "These people aren't fighters, they barely have any weapons and just want food and to live in peace." In answer to a question by a National Public Radio reporter about what the USG could do to assist, Georgie stated that she felt "the US is obligated to help these people." She asked that consideration be given to offering

"safe passage" out of Laos to resettlement in the U.S. if possible. However, Ed countered that he thought most just wanted to stay in Laos and that resettlement wasn't really what they desired. They made no comment about plans for future trips to Laos.

17. (U) The press conference was not covered in the Bangkok Post, The Nation or the International Herald Tribune's June 10 editions.

18. (U) This message was cleared by Embassy Vientiane.  
BOYCE